

# Emperor Dragon

by faery-of-fiction

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Summary: When Atobe's merchant expedition leads Tezuka to the Rikkai empire he didn't think he would be the object that Emperor Sanada wants most.

## 1. Chapter 1

Notes: This was originally as part of the Tenipuri-xpair exchange for Feihu.

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"Welcome to the empire," Sanada greeted his guests, who were bowing so deeply that he could not yet get a good look at them. "Rise and explain to me why you have come here." The Rikkai empire was strong and fierce and often got visitors of varying kinds. From nearby peasants who had qualms with each other to nobles that wished to garner his favour or to submit a complaint about his military or some such. It was not his fault that nobles stupidly got in the way of his general. Any idiot that thought to come between Yukimura and his goals deserved what they got. Though he hoped that with Yanagi now sent off to advise Yukimura on battle tactics, his general and army would decide to go around noble strongholds who were loyal to the crown and not through them. Expansion and victory were good. But dealing with whining nobles made his head hurt and made him want to hurt someone.

But this entourage did not look like either peasants or annoyed nobles. They were certainly well dressed enough to be nobles and the man in the front had a large enough entourage. But there were just a number of small things that pegged him for something else.

"Thank you for having us, your majesty," the man said as he rose. "My name is Atobe Keigo, of the Atobe merchant family. We deal with especially rare and exquisite materials and jewels. Having heard of

the empire's wealth and discerning taste, I was of the belief that my services could be of use to you."

"I see," Sanada said. He eyed up Atobe and then glanced at his still bowing entourage. He had heard of the Atobe name, it was hard not to when it seemed that every province and kingdom they had incorporated into the empire had dealt with the man and his family. Yes, the goods that he had been shown were exquisite, but he had plenty of such things around the castle and throughout the kingdom. He did not see the need to do business with a foreigner, no matter how handsome he may be. "And what can you offer that my own merchants and traders cannot procure?"

"My family has been in business a long time, your majesty, and we have built up a large collection of unbelievable goods, and have numerous contacts and favours that other traders can only dream of having. Anything you can think of and desire can be yours," Atobe said. It was obvious he was good at his job, and even Sanada was becoming intrigued.

"And if I am bored of jewels and fancy cloth?" Sanada asked. He had an excess of that. "And I said that you can rise, this includes your entourage." He gestured once more for them all to rise and hoped that they would understand. He demanded respect from his citizens and visitors, but he considered himself fair and did not need people simpering and bowing to a nauseating extent around him. He knew he was strong and powerful, he did not need an excessive show of deference to prove it.

"Then perhaps you are interested in near mythical weapons, old books filled with stories of the world, or various spices and foods from around the globe," Atobe said.

Sanada thought he might have gone on listing more things that he could offer, but his entourage was finally rising and, as he skimmed the faces and the outfits, he noticed that the one closest to Atobe seemed to be wearing what could be described as a military type outfit. He was unarmed - as a guest in the kingdom, it would be quite rude to go before the emperor armed - but he held himself like someone used to the weight of a sword on his hip. But it wasn't the fact that he was a soldier that drew his eye. As a merchant, it would make sense for the Atobe family to employ a fairly large military contingent to make sure goods were transported safely and deals were followed through. So it wasn't the fact that Atobe had guards that was curious. And as the emperor, he personally saw soldiers everywhere on a daily basis. Even now the room was dotted with highly trained soldiers acting as his guard.

No. It was something else entirely that drew his eyes to the man and kept his attention solely focused on him. When the man looked his way, obviously feeling the sting of his gaze, he felt his breath catch.

He had never felt such an instant attraction to a person in his life. And all he could think of was that he would pay Atobe his whole fortune if he would sell him that man like one of his beautiful goods.

"What if I told you that I wanted your guard," Sanada said, cutting off whatever Atobe was still saying to him.

He had obviously startled the man, but much to his credit, and undoubtedly to his years of training in the business, he recovered swiftly. "I thank you for acknowledging my guard's appeal, but I'm afraid he's not for sale."

"But you said you can get me anything," Sanada countered.

"Anything. Not anyone. And he's currently under contract to me and not for sale," Atobe said.

Sanada glared at him and then shifted his look over to the guard. He hadn't reacted at all to the exchange, other than a quick glance to Atobe at the start of it. He wanted to know what the man was thinking about this. If he had offended him, he was confident in his ability to set things right later. But at the moment, he needed to ensure the other stayed here in his empire, in his city and preferably in his castle.

"I will pay any price," Sanada said, with emphasis. It was a bold and somewhat unwise offer to make. Atobe could ask for quite a lot, and right now, Sanada would be tempted to give it to him.

Sanada could see Atobe hesitate at the offer, but one glance at the guard had him turning back to Sanada with a firm look. "I'm afraid that he's too rare and special to sell. Even to a glorious emperor like yourself," Atobe said.

"Rare?" Sanada asked. "He seems a common enough soldier."

"If he were so common, why would a great and powerful man like yourself desire him so much, your majesty?"

Sanada frowned. He supposed that Atobe had a point. Stopping to think about it a moment, he doubted that a normal human guard would draw his attention like the man had. "Then what makes him so rare?"

Surprisingly, it wasn't Atobe that answered, but the taller man beside him. "I am a shifter, your majesty." At the low and smooth voice, Sanada felt himself growing hard. Fortunately, the layers and cut of his clothes would hide it. But it was odd for someone, even a shifter, to have an effect like that on him with such casual words. It just made the man all the more intriguing.

"Of what variety?" Sanada asked.

"Your majesty," Atobe interrupted before the guard could answer, "As my guard is not for sale, why don't we bring our talks to more productive topics."

Sanada was annoyed at being thwarted at every step. But Atobe was a man of business, and he could play that game well enough to make sure that the merchant had no reason to leave his city anytime soon. And in that time, he was quite sure of his ability to get close to the guard and get what he wanted through other means. Just because he wasn't used to being patient didn't mean he didn't know how to be.

"As you say. Then I require you for other services," Sanada said. His accountants may not like this plan if he ended up buying too many

frivolous things from Atobe, but right now he didn't care. And as emperor there was, fortunately, nobody around who could tell him to stop being foolish over a guard. Though perhaps he would see what seeds and bulbs Atobe could procure for him just to make sure that at least Yukimura would be on his side.

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Tezuka panted as he pulled out of Atobe's hot body and rolled to the side. The sex had been satisfying, as always, but it hadn't sated Tezuka's desire like he would have wanted. Much to his shame, it had not been Atobe's deep blue eyes that he had seen in front of him as he had headed toward completion. Instead, he had pictured the deep brown, hard gaze of the emperor.

The man unnerved him. And he certainly didn't like that he seemed to think that he could buy Tezuka, as if he were property. But even with that, he could not deny that he felt some strange, strong attraction to the man.

But Tezuka knew that those were dangerous thoughts. And he was thankful for Atobe's ability to keep his head around the strong man and firmly tell him no. Unfortunately, that did not seem to deter the emperor, and Atobe was too savvy a businessman to miss out on the opportunity that having an emperor who wanted them close could bring. Not only would it be bad for business to leave now, it could also be bad for their health if the emperor decided to use force instead of his wallet to get Atobe and his entourage to stay.

It was worrisome, and that worry combined with the need to convince himself that he felt nothing for the emperor had led him into Atobe's bed. It was not his first time here. He had been Atobe's body guard for quite some time and his casual lover for nearly all of it. There were no expectations or sentiment between them, though they certainly respected and liked each other.

Fortunately, they were both hard workers, not sentimental types. So it wasn't odd for either of them to leave the bed shortly after coupling. In fact, they both only tended to stay the night when they had drunk a bit too much at a party, or they planned on enjoying each other a few more times before morning.

"I should check on the supplies," Tezuka said.

"You worry far too much about the competence of my other guards. But if it makes you feel better, it certainly won't hurt," Atobe said, still sprawled comfortably on the bed.

"It's our first time here and we don't know how our reception will be after the meeting earlier." The emperor taking such a keen interest in him, and Atobe being so unhelpful about it, could cause any type of reaction. It never hurt to take extra precautions.

"True. And I imagine that you will be familiarizing yourself with the city after?"

"Of course. Knowledge is power, and your safety and the success of your trading requires both."

"You are far too good for me," Atobe said, giving Tezuka a small

smile. "Which is why I will never sell your contract to the emperor. But he's a powerful man, and you know I can't disrespect him by sending you away."

Tezuka frowned. They had already gone over this - If they should stay or go, or if Tezuka himself should stay or go. He didn't like the choices or the reasons, but he understood them. And as much as he was reluctant to do so, he would play the part required of him and do his job to the best of his ability, as always. "Just try to keep me away from him as much as possible. He seems the type to be very focused on what he wants."

"I'll do the best I can. Though you shouldn't let him get to you. You're strong enough to resist him, and if he tries to be forceful, it will harm his reputation and we would leave immediately."

Tezuka nodded. That was more than he expected from Atobe and it pleased him to know that Atobe would put his safety ahead of a good deal. Even if it had to get to an extreme before that happened. But as a strong shifter trained in fighting, there was no need to worry for him until it reached that point.

Though, this wasn't helping him to not think about the emperor and how he wasn't sure that Sanada would be forcing him into anything if he were put into a compromising position. What he needed was to clear his head of sex and strange emperors. Checking in on their guards and going for a walk in the city would hopefully help with that.

"Let me get you a cloth to clean you up. And then I'll go," Tezuka said. He moved from the bed and went into the bathroom to clean himself off and prepare a warm cloth for Atobe. He returned and gently cleaned him. "There you go."

"Thank you."

"Will you be getting any more work done today?" Tezuka asked.

"No. I think it best I get a full night's rest and an early start tomorrow. I feel the emperor will be keeping me busy and on my toes."

"Alright. Then sleep well." Tezuka pulled the blankets up back around Atobe and gave him a light kiss. Just because his thoughts were all over the place and he had thought about inappropriate things during their coupling did not mean that he held any hard feelings toward Atobe, or that he didn't care for him. Kindness towards Atobe cost him nothing.

He returned the cloth to the bathroom and cleaned it before putting his clothes back on. Sure that he was presentable, he first went to check on their goods and the guards. Satisfied that everything was in order and there were no concerns, he headed to the gate that would take him from the royal grounds, where their lodgings were, and into the city. It was fortunate that this city didn't seem to employ a curfew like most seemed to. Or perhaps as a guest he was exempt. Either way, he found that nobody stopped him from leaving or warned him of when he needed to be back.

The city was mostly quiet and dark at this time of night, but Tezuka made his way easily down the streets. He doubted that there was

anything lurking in the dark that could truly harm him. And with it being too dark to properly admire the architecture of a new kingdom and to take in the details, there was no reason to move slowly. Tonight was just about familiarizing himself with streets and the general layout of the city. He could work on the details later.

As he turned a corner to head to what seemed to be the the seedy, nightlife filled district, he felt a presence nearby. He had felt slightly as if he were being watched for a while now, but had dismissed it, as he had not seen nor heard anyone. But now it was stronger and he paused in the street and turned around to see the vague hints of a figure.

"Skulking around mister?" A voice asked from a shadowed area across the way.

Tezuka was of a mind to ignore him and keep going to the more populated area before the shadowed figure spoke again.

"It'd be a shame if the emperor's new toy was up to no good."

That made Tezuka frown. He was not the emperor's new toy. And he disliked that such gossip had started already. Annoyed at such talk, he had no patience to play with people he couldn't see. "Perhaps you are the one who should stop lurking in the shadows," Tezuka said.

"It's night time. I'm afraid it's really nothing but darkness and shadows right now. The perfect setting to get up to no good," the figure said. He then stepped away from the shadowed path and further into the light. The man was smiling far too broadly for Tezuka's comfort. But then, he thought that he recognized him. Just with a more serious look on his face.

"I'm just going for a walk," Tezuka said.

"At this hour? Something on your mind?"

"Nothing that concerns you." He much preferred being an anonymous guard in Atobe's employment to having the emperor's, and what seemed to be one of his own guard's, attention on him. Because now he could remember where he had seen the man before. It had been in the throne room of the emperor. Though he had been in an uniform then, and while he had not been on the dias, he had been close enough to it to be of a fairly decent rank in the guard.

"On the contrary, everything that happens in this kingdom concerns me. Even the thoughts going through your head."

With that as the only warning, Tezuka felt a jolt of magic as the man moved from the shadows and poked his forehead. His own innate magic instantly reacted, repelling the man back away from him and onto the ground. But it was obvious from this that this guard was just no ordinary foot soldier.

"Interestingâ€¦" the man said as he stood and dusted off his clothes.

"I don't appreciate being attacked by strangers," Tezuka said.

"I'm not a stranger. I'm Niou. We met in the hall. Wellâ€¦ we saw each other in the hall," Niou said, giving him another grin.

Tezuka did not consider briefly seeing someone in the same room meeting them. And even if he had, that show of magic would still not have been welcome. "It is still inexcusable to look into someone else's mind."

"Maybeâ€¦. but it's not like it mattered, right?" Niou asked.

"That is beside the point."

"Well either way, I guess I'll just believe that you aren't skulking for now. Things to do, people to see and all that. I'll see you around, Tezuka. Probably before you see me." And with that, Niou slunk back into the shadows.

Though Tezuka could still feel the eyes on him. He knew he could probably lose the man in the crowds if he wanted to venture into a tavern or two. But suddenly his desire to explore the city was gone. With one last look at the direction Niou had disappeared in, he turned and started making his way back to the castle.

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The situation with Sanada had only compounded his dislike for this kingdom and his desire to leave, so it was with great reluctance that Tezuka put on his uniform and prepared to stay close to Atobe.

He knew that Atobe had meetings planned with various nobles of the court, which may or may not require his presence at Atobe's discretion. But he also knew that the emperor had asked Atobe to join him for afternoon tea to discuss acquiring various things, and there would be no way he wouldn't be forced into attending.

The morning's meetings went by far too quickly for once, and before he had figured out what to feel or think, Tezuka found himself waiting a few paces away from Atobe on a balcony that overlooked beautiful gardens. The table was already prepared for the afternoon tea and the only thing missing was Sanada.

Tezuka was thankful that he had always been good at holding a neutral expression, his stoic appearance had rarely failed him over the years. Because when Sanada came marching through the doors, Tezuka felt a myriad of emotions flow through him, none he felt comfortable letting others read on his face.

He bowed along with Atobe and straightened when told to do so. As Atobe and the emperor took their seats, he moved further back toward the door and out of the way, where he hoped to be forgotten.

"Will your guard not join us?" Sanada asked, as he reached for a quiche and moved it to his plate. Tezuka noted that it looked vaguely comical, with how large Sanada's hands were compared to the small quiche and the delicate looking finery around him. So distracted by the contradictions, it took him a second to realize what Sanada's question meant.

"It's not customary, your highness," Atobe said. "He's trained to stand guard and protect me."

"You have nothing to fear when in the heart of my castle," Sanada said, then gestured to the empty third chair at the table. Tezuka had seen the chair there earlier, but had hoped that it was a common fixture or that Sanada would be bringing a guest.

As to having nothing to fear, Tezuka begged to differ. Yes, Atobe may be safe from assassination or angry merchants, but Tezuka doubted that he could say the same about himself. Especially when the emperor looked at him as if he wanted to devour him in various ways.

"Then I'm sure that Tezuka would be willing to cede my protection to your own guards for a time," Atobe said. He glanced his way, obviously in apology for not being able to get him out of this, but Tezuka had expected as much. He just didn't know if the feeling was dread or delight as he moved to take the seat with them.

"Thank you for the honour," Tezuka said politely. He gave another small bow before sitting.

Tezuka poured himself tea and did his best to ignore the eyes of the emperor on him. Thankfully, Atobe got right down to business and Sanada was forced to look away.

"I'm afraid you weren't overly specific in what you may be looking for. So I prepared a portfolio of some of the more interesting things currently with us," Atobe said, and opened up the folder he had brought. "Of course, if there's anything you're looking for that we don't have with us now, I'm sure we could procure it for you."

"Would you and your entourage be required to leave for that, or would you send a messenger to retrieve it?" Sanada asked.

"It would depend on the item. If it is Atobe possession, a messenger would suffice. If it required travel and careful negotiation to get for you, then my personal attention would be necessary," Atobe said.

And right away, Tezuka knew exactly which items the emperor would want from Atobe, and he was sure that Sanada was clever enough to drag out the process as long as it took for him to get what he wanted from Tezuka, or to grow bored of the game.

The meeting went on for quite some time, though thankfully, besides an odd input into how the food was or what he thought of a certain item or two, his opinion was not required, and he was almost able to relax despite being so close to the emperor. Of course, it would have been easier if the emperor did not insist on finding any excuse to lean into his personal space, brush fingers against his when passing things, or stare at him.

Still, it had been mostly painless for him and quite lucrative for Atobe.

"That was quite the successful meeting," Atobe said, walking back to their rooms as he reviewed the notes he took. "Thank you for behaving yourself."

"I'm not a child, Atobe. I know how to do my job." And he knew how to



do it well. Even when it required things typically outside of his job description.

"I know. But I also know that the emperor makes you uncomfortable. And I can't say I approve of his fixation on you," Atobe said as he entered the room that he had set up as his receiving room and office. The emperor was not the only client Atobe planned on having in Rikkai, even if he seemed to be to the most lucrative.

"I'm sure that it's a passing fancy. You of all people should know how those with wealth and power change tastes quickly," Tezuka said.

Atobe looked at him for a long moment. "I will choose to take that as a comment on my business, which relies on ever changing and fickle tastes of nobles, and not on me directly," Atobe said. He undid his jacket and slid it off before tossing it on the back of a sofa. He then moved behind his desk and sat down to look at the stack of papers he had to get through. "It seems that I'll be preoccupied here for rest of the afternoon. If you wanted to check on other things, now would be a good time."

Tezuka gave a nod. He could explore more of the city or even more of the palace grounds. Both would help to clear his head. What he would really have liked to do was find a secluded spot to shift and stretch, but that was risky at the best of times, and in a foreign city where he wasn't yet familiar with all the rules and nuances of the culture would make it too dangerous.

"I'll be back in time to see you safely to dinner," Tezuka said. And with a small bow excused himself from Atobe's presence.

## 2. Chapter 2

Tezuka was walking down a corridor when several women in ornate dresses headed towards him. Not wanting to get in their way, he stepped off to the side and into the alcove of a window. As they passed, he looked outside, over the large grounds around the castle. He noticed an extensive maze that seemed interesting and worth exploring. It had been a long time since he'd done one of those. And if things went bad here, it might be wise to know how to use the maze to their advantage. Or at least not be foolish enough to get lost in it.

That now in mind, he made his way to the main level and out of the back door. It was still hot outside, as it was a clear and sunny day, and there weren't many brave enough to be out walking the gardens. Tezuka took advantage of the quiet and headed to the maze. There were a few guards posted here and there, but as he was a welcomed guest and up to no mischief, they let him pass with a small nod of acknowledgement.

Once inside of the maze, Tezuka relaxed slightly once he was away from the eyes of the guards, the nobles of the castle, and most importantly, the emperor. Feeling a little like a child, he started exploring the different paths.

He wasn't sure in what circumstances he and Atobe may end up here while trying to avoid harm, but he had found that being overly

prepared had saved them from difficult and deadly situations more than once in the past.

As he continued wandering, his thoughts drifted to from other travels with Atobe to the afternoon tea spent with Sanada. He growled to himself and continued walking through various paths. It didn't take him long to realise that he had gotten himself lost in the maze by letting his thoughts wander.

There was no point getting upset though. Learning the various routes of the maze was why he was here. And well, if he were to start while lost, it would only further ensure that he knew all of the details of the maze. Now focused on the maze, Tezuka looked around and frowned when all paths looked the same. He would just have to go about this methodically, and surely the center of the maze as well as its entrance and exit would come to him.

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Sanada was working his way through a large stack of paperwork that Yagyuu had brought him when a flash of white moving across the grounds outside his window had caught his eye. Looking more closely, he easily recognized the white and pale blue uniform as belonging to the man of his desires.

While he had given Atobe and his entourage the privilege of being his special guests and access to all public area within the castle he had not expected to see Tezuka heading towards the hedge maze. Watching him enter, he wondered just what he was up to. But before he could watch his progress, Yagyuu placed another paper in front of him.

"This would go faster if you focused and stopped day dreaming," Yagyuu said.

While Tezuka may have seemed like something out of his dreams, if he had been day dreaming it would certainly have been of more than just watching Tezuka wander through the maze. It would probably involve him cornering Tezuka in the maze and ravishing him in a dead end where he couldn't escape.

He was just starting to smile at the thought when Yagyuu sighed loudly next to him. "Reallyâ€¦ I don't know how Yanagi puts up with you. What is it you're looking at?" Yagyuu asked as he leaned over to look out the window.

"Nothing. What's the next paper about."

Yagyuu didn't seem convinced but started explaining the next stack of papers and explained what needed his attention and where he should sign.

Sanada made it through several more documents before his attention drifted outside again to where Tezuka was still wandering.

"You know, if you'd rather go play with the merchant's guard, I can sign what needs to be done and just fill you in on what has been approved or denied later," Yagyuu said. He then pushed up his glasses making them catch the light ominously.

It reminded Sanada just how much he regretted sending Yanagi off to watch over Yukimura even if it was the prudent decision. But if Yanagi had been here instead of Yagyuu, he would have trusted him with the paperwork without question.

However, when it came to Yagyuu, Yanagi's chosen replacement, he always felt extra cautious. Yagyuu was certainly proficient and knowledgeable and the empire would not run half as well without him. But he also had a mischievous nearly cruel side to him. So it was best to not leave major decisions up to him. Who knew what disaster he may come back to.

"No. It's fine. I'll work on it a bit longer before I take my afternoon break," Sanada finally said. Though what he really wanted to do was just set the paperwork on fire and go see what Tezuka was up to in the maze.

Unfortunately, the emperor in him had to ignore the desires of the man and the dragon and focus on work. At least for the next thirty minutes. Then, if Tezuka was still out wandering he would go join him and rescue him from the evils of the Rikkai shrubbery.

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Tezuka cursed as he took another wrong turn and ended up at a dead end. He should be better at this, but today his thoughts just wouldn't stay focused long enough to put the maze together. He was being beyond careless and it was bothering him more than he'd like.

He took another turn, sure that this one would lead him somewhere useful, where he could get his bearings, when he heard a familiar voice from behind him.

"May I assist you?"

Tezuka turned and masked all emotion on his face as he did so. "Not at all," Tezuka said. He was startled by the emperor's sudden appearance and wondered why he hadn't felt the man's approach. Perhaps he had been wandering around for longer than he realized.

"Then you intended to walk past this spot several times?"

"Merely admiring the architecture." He was sure he would have been able to defeat this puzzle handily if his thoughts weren't so distracted by the man in front of him.

"I think you've admired enough. Any more and you run the risk of starving in my gardens. And as a good host, I simply can't have that."

"Have you been watching me?" Tezuka asked.

"My office affords a lovely view of the garden. And I'm afraid that you wandering around aimlessly in the maze was hard to miss."

Tezuka blushed slightly and looked away. That was embarrassing, and he hoped that it was only Sanada who had noticed his carelessness.

"I'm sorry to have been a distraction," Tezuka eventually said.

"No need. You were most definitely a pleasant distraction."

"I didn't realize that the emperor enjoyed watching his guests suffer," Tezuka said, and then regretted it.

"I don't," Sanada said swiftly and moved toward Tezuka. "It was having a chance to watch you, however far away you were, that I enjoyed."

"I'm sure that will pass." And maybe it was that belief that made Tezuka dislike all of the attention from the emperor. Giving in to any sort of desire on his end would only lead to suffering when Sanada's attention turned elsewhere..

"I doubt it. I have never known such attraction before. Tell me, Tezuka. Do you feel nothing between us?" Sanada was only an arm's length away as he stared into Tezuka's eyes, waiting for his answer.

"No. I apologize." It was a lie. And one Tezuka wasn't comfortable with saying, but it seemed safer than the alternative. He was worried that if he let any of his guard down, he would find himself in a precarious situation. There was just something about Sanada that made his dragon side want to curl up at Sanada's feet and get ear scratches.

"I don't believe you," Sanada said. He closed the space between them and brushed his fingers along Tezuka's jaw, then used that touch to lift up his chin so he could better look at him. "You shouldn't lie to your emperor."

There was no point in reminding Sanada that he was not Tezuka's emperor, because that was not the point of this conversation and, as a guest in the empire, it wasn't something that would be wise to denounce. But that didn't mean he had to make things easy on him either.

"What kind of shifter are you?" Sanada asked after Tezuka hadn't replied for some time.

While slightly thrown by the sudden change in topic, Tezuka was thankful enough that Sanada was pursuing a different line of questioning to answer honestly and share what he really was. "Dragon."

Sanada's eyes widened a bit at that, and it was clear to Tezuka that he was surprised by his answer. "Impressive. No wonder Atobe is so determined to keep you," Sanada said.

"Is it so surprising?" Tezuka asked.

"I suppose not. Considering your position as a guard and the way you carry yourself, there are few other shifters that you could be. But still—dragon shifters are rare and I did not expect to find one wandering my gardens."

"You're taking it quite well, considering," Tezuka said. He was used to any number of reactions, but Sanada's calm acceptance and

continued fascination with him was not the usual one.

"Why shouldn't I? In fact. Finding out that you're a dragon explains so much to me."

"It does?"

"I'm attracted to you, Tezuka. Learning that you are a rare and powerful dragon only makes you that much more alluring to me."

It was Tezuka's turn to be surprised by the straightforward honesty of the emperor. But before he could phrase a proper reply, Sanada was leaning in to close the final distance between their lips.

Tezuka had a split second to decide what to do and to lean back if he didn't want the kiss. Instead, he pressed forward and initiated the kiss while gripping the fabric of Sanada's jacket. If he was going to be careless and give in to curiosity and lust he would not let Sanada decide everything.

The kiss was too long in coming to be gentle and slow. Instead, it was filled with passion as they pressed their mouths together roughly and quickly, parting their lips to explore each other's tastes and warmth more thoroughly.

Tezuka found himself weak to the forcefulness of Sanada's passion, but as a hand moved down to shamelessly grope his ass, he remembered just where they were; he pulled his mouth away from Sanada's and gave him a small push away.

"Stop."

"Why?" Sanada asked. He was panting and clearly aroused, but he held back from touching or kissing Tezuka for the moment.

"We shouldn't be doing this," Tezuka said.

"Why not? I've been drawn to you from the moment I saw you, and I want you. Surely you feel it, too."

Tezuka did. And that was the problem and the reason they shouldn't be doing anything. "That doesn't matter."

"And why does it not matter? If we both want each other, there's no reason to hold back."

"You're an emperor and I'm a common guard for hire. It is a horrible combination."

"You're not merely a guard. You're a shifter."

"That's even more of a reason to stay away. Relationships with shifters can be complicated," Tezuka said. He could not see how this coupling could lead to a relationship or anything good. A shifter had a hard enough time blending in with society without being the consort to a powerful emperor. A kiss to sate their curiosity would just have to suffice for them.

"Perhaps it would be in other places you've travelled. But you're in Rikkai and I'm not exactly a human emperor."

"What do you mean?" Tezuka asked, eyeing him up and wondering just what he had missed.

Sanada gave a chuckle, but it wasn't unkind. He leaned back into Tezuka's personal space, but instead of pressing his lips to Tezuka's, he brushed them against his ear. "I'm a dragon, too."

The warm breath against his ear combined with those words caused a shiver to run down Tezuka's spine. If it were true, it would explain so much. The instant recognition and desire. And perhaps even why someone as strong as himself would have such a strong urge to do the emperor's bidding.

"And I will be your dragon if you'll have me. I need you, Tezuka," Sanada said, sincerity and lust shining in his eyes.

Tezuka felt himself responding to that look on an instinctual level, and was so overwhelmed by it that he had to look away. Still, he found himself correcting Sanada even before he really registered the words. "It's Kunimitsu."

"Look at me," Sanada said.

Tezuka hesitated for a moment before lifting his eyes to look back up at Sanada.

When their eyes locked, the desire in Sanada's eyes only grew stronger. Tezuka found himself drowning in it. There was a raw energy and fire in his gaze that was not just from Sanada's dragon powers.

"Kunimitsu," Sanada said. One of them, Tezuka couldn't be sure who, let out a growl of need before their lips locked once more. They struggled for dominance over it for only a moment before Tezuka submitted to Sanada, allowing him to lead the kiss and pull him close to his body again.

This time when Sanada groped his ass, Tezuka let out a breathy moan and ran his fingers through the Sanada's hair, tugging it lightly. The move made Sanada growl and kiss him harder, which only encouraged Tezuka to do it again.

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Sanada lost track of how long they were kissing, but when they finally broke apart, they were breathless. Even then, Sanada couldn't keep his hands from wandering all over Tezuka, exploring as much of his clothed body as he could reach.

Looking at Tezuka, a pale blush staining his cheeks and his lips swollen from his aggressive kisses, Sanada wanted nothing more than to explore Tezuka's unclothed body, too. It would be fun to see just where else that pink blush spread when Tezuka was laid out before him in the nude.

He was tempted to strip where they were, but he knew that the maze was overlooked by too many windows in the castle to get careless. There was the gazebo in the center of the maze that would offer them enough privacy, especially since his guards would not let others

enter the maze to disturb them. But it wasn't the most comfortable of places, and Sanada, despite lusting after Tezuka these last days, had not yet taken to carrying oil around in his pocket. That left one solution.

"Would you care to retire to my rooms for refreshments?" he asked. He wanted to be more direct, but worried about scaring Tezuka off again. As he asked the question, he watched Tezuka blink away the fog of arousal as he contemplated the words and wondered if he had been too indirect. "It would be more comfortable," he hastily added.

"Comfortable would be nice," Tezuka finally said, his voice a little gravelly and breathless. It was doing all sorts of things to Sanada's libido and making him reconsider sneaking in a bit more foreplay where they were.

Somehow, he managed to pull himself away from Tezuka without groping or kissing him again. Though he did take his hand. "I wouldn't want you to wander off and get lost again," he said.

"I wasn't lost." Tezuka's flush deepened with embarrassment and Sanada had to turn his gaze back to the path to not watch as it moved beneath his collar. He would have time to explore that later.

Having been running around the maze for as long as he could remember, Sanada quickly led them out of it without error. Tezuka looked only slightly put out about that, but quickly recovered his usual look when he saw the guards nearby. Though he gently tugged his hand away from Sanada's, he made no indication that he had changed his mind about continuing to follow Sanada to his rooms.

"Tezuka and I will be having iced tea and refreshments in my personal receiving room," Sanada said to the nearest runner. The man bowed low, then ran off toward the kitchens. Sanada knew that if they kept a slow pace, the exact opposite of what he wanted right now, the requested drinks and food would be waiting for them when they arrived. As he did not wish to earn a lecture from Yagyuu on proper decorum by breaking down and dragging Tezuka through the corridors, occasionally stopping to kiss and molest him, he forced his feet to keep the leisurely pace.

"Perhaps you could explain some of the art as we walk," Tezuka suggested.

Since Sanada doubted that Tezuka really wanted to think about artwork right now, he figured that Tezuka was also just trying to ignore the sexual tension and give them both something else to focus on. It was easier said than done. But Sanada paused in front of a larger family portrait just off of the main hall. "This was the last extended family portrait that my family had done."

Tezuka's eyes scanned the painting, likely looking for Sanada while taking in details of the others. "Which one are you?" he asked eventually.

"It was made some time ago. I'm afraid that we're overdue for another. But that's me and my parents," Sanada said, gesturing first to the lovely woman holding an overly dressed baby, and then to the man standing proudly beside her, holding the hand of another young

boy.

"Your mother looks lovely in this painting. I assume you've had other portraits done since this one?"

Sanada gave a small chuckle. "Of course. But none with the cousins and various other relatives. Perhaps when I wed, I will find the time and motivation to get another commissioned." He watched Tezuka as he spoke, but didn't get any reaction. Only a neutral nod as if it made perfect sense. Which it probably did to Tezuka. Just because Sanada was slowly dragging him to his chambers to ravish him before either could second guess this, it didn't mean that it would lead to anything. At least to Tezuka. For his part, he was already imagining family portraits done with Tezuka standing beside him.

In Tezuka's mind, this was probably just a passing fancy to Sanada, who had several ladies vying for his affections and for the title of his bride. But Sanada wasn't traditional like that and he had no desire for a wife, or for the soft curves of a woman. Just like he had no desire to let Tezuka leave Rikkai.

It didn't matter that they had only met and didn't really know each other. Sanada knew that this was the man he wanted to spend his life with. And just the thought of it made his animalistic side very happy. His inner dragon was counting down the moments until he could pin Tezuka naked underneath him and claim him as his.

"Shall we carry on," he asked, when he noticed his thoughts drifting into dangerous territory.

There must have been something in his voice, as Tezuka eyed him a moment before nodding. They continued walking down halls and up stairs, and with each stop in front of a statue or painting, Sanada cursed not only the size of his castle but also the amount of decorations between the entrance and his room.

Eventually, they made it to his quarters, where they passed the ever present guards stationed at the entrance to finally enter the receiving room. As expected, a light spread of food and iced tea awaited them, along with a staff member happy and ready to serve them.

"We'll serve ourselves, thank you," Sanada said, and waited for the servant to bow and exit before gesturing to Tezuka to sit if he'd like. "Please, help yourself."

Tezuka looked at the food, and while he poured himself a glass of iced tea and took a sip, he didn't sit. Sanada watched the man drink, half hypnotized as he drained half of the glass and put it back on the table.

"I didn't think you were serious about the refreshments," Tezuka said.

"Even an emperor has to keep up appearances. And I figured wandering around the maze for so long must have been thirsty work."

"Must you keep bringing that up?" Tezuka asked, the rosy tint returning to his cheeks. And Sanada decided that as long as Tezuka kept reacting so prettily, he would just have to keep teasing



him.

"I'm willing to be distractedâ€¦" he trailed off as he moved closer to Tezuka. Some of the passion from the maze had cooled over their walk to his rooms, like he feared it would. But he was confident that they could reignite it quickly, as long as Tezuka put up no more resistance.

"I'm not sure it's wise to distract the emperor of the Rikkai. I'm sure he's quite busy," Tezuka said. But he held his ground, and there was something in his eyes that made Sanada move into his personal space.

"Not for you," Sanada said, moving a hand around Tezuka's back to pull him close. "Never for you." He pressed his lips back against Tezuka's and it felt right and perfect. Especially when the strong dragon in his arms relaxed and let him take over, trusting him to lead the dance between them without fight.

Tezuka submitting so beautifully to him made his inner dragon roar with pure possessiveness. They needed to get out of their clothes now.

He let go of Tezuka to move his hands between them, getting started on their numerous buttons while trying to keep the kiss going as best he could. "Too many damned buttons," he growled in complaint.

"Waitâ€¦ let me," Tezuka said, brushing away Sanada's hands to undo his own buttons. Sanada took a moment to watch those long and strong fingers skillfully move down Tezuka's tunic before realizing that he was still fully clothed. He tugged off more than unbuttoned his own outfit and, in mere moments, was stripped bare and ready to go.

Tezuka chuckled, then licked kiss-swollen lips as he took in the sight of Sanada's proud member standing tall between his legs. Liking the way that Tezuka was looking at him, Sanada struck a manly pose. He knew he had nothing to be ashamed of and was quite pleased to see that Tezuka seemed to think the same.

Tossing his jacket and shirt onto the loveseat, Tezuka stepped close to Sanada and wrapped his hand around Sanada's length. Sanada moaned at the bold action and moved his hand back to the small of Tezuka's back, where it felt like it belonged, and pulled him close to whisper in his ear. "You are such a tease."

Tezuka didn't reply and gave him a look that Sanada could only interpret along the lines of 'don't pose like that if you don't want to be touched.' And truth be told, he enjoyed being touched by Tezuka's warm hand, but he also was annoyed that his would be lover was not yet nude like him. He wanted to see and touch all of him.

He gave him a kiss and then slowly started moving them toward his bedroom. He did promise Tezuka comfort and it would be quite foolish to have come all this way to climax from a handjob on his receiving room floor.

Once in the bedroom, Sanada plucked Tezuka's glasses from his face and placed them carefully on a table before going for his pants. With

some effort and help from Tezuka, they were finally both nude and Sanada drank in the sight of his fellow dragon shifter. He was thinner than Sanada, but just as toned, and he appreciated every inch of Tezuka's body. When he noticed the scars, he reached out to touch them first with his fingers, and then his mouth.

He was rewarded for his thorough inspection of all the scars he could find by Tezuka's breathy moans and a hand tangled in his hair. He could spend hours worshipping the body in front of him, memorizing every little mark on Tezuka's body, but right now, he wanted to claim the man.

"On the bed. Get comfortable," Sanada said, and swatted Tezuka's ass to get him moving. He walked to a bedside table and opened the drawer to retrieve the oil he used for such occasions.

Turning to the bed, Sanada let out a moan as he saw that Tezuka had crawled onto the large bed on his hands and knees and was waiting for him like that. He licked his lips hungrily as he prowled to the bed and climbed on it. "Perfect."

"It would be if you hurried," Tezuka countered, his eyes focused on Sanada's hard and leaking erection.

"Be careful what you wish for," Sanada said and gave Tezuka's ass another light smack as he moved behind him. He rather liked the way that the skin of Tezuka's bottom pinkened at his touch. For being a strong dragon shifter, it did seem that Tezuka's body reacted beautifully to his own. He gave another light smack to his other cheek to balance out the look, and then one more when Tezuka gasped so beautifully for it.

He poured oil directly onto Tezuka's ass and over his crack, watching it slide down to his opening. He then slid a finger through it before gently pressing in. He moaned at the feel of Tezuka's hot, tight heat around his finger and watched, completely captivated, as Tezuka's ass hungrily swallowed up his finger. Not wanting to wait, he quickly added a second; while Tezuka was tight, his body continued to accept his fingers easily.

Sanada had known that he wanted Tezuka from the moment he saw him, but now that he also knew him to be dragon shifter, and that his body so willingly submitted and opened up to his own, just confirmed to him that Tezuka was the man meant to be his mate.

As he moved his fingers in and out of Tezuka, he reached around to stroke Tezuka's erection and really make him moan. "Don't hold back," he told him, when he noticed Tezuka biting his lip in an attempt to be quiet. "I want to hear you." And if his guards heard, he didn't care. A part of him wanted them - and all of the kingdom - to know that Tezuka was his and that he had claimed him and made him moan so beautifully.

"I want to feel you," Tezuka said, after he gave in and let out a pretty moan. And since Sanada had no idea how any man could resist such a request, he pulled his fingers out and quickly coated himself in the oil.

"Brace yourself," he warned before moving in close behind Tezuka. He took a moment to bend down and trail a few kisses along his back and

shoulders, then guided himself to Tezuka's entrance. With a snap of his hips, he thrust all of the way in and paused as he panted, trying to collect himself.

Tezuka was so hot and tight around him and the man wasn't giving Sanada any time to recover from it. "More," Tezuka said as he rocked slightly, causing Sanada's cock to move within that sinful heat.

Not needing further encouragement, and somewhat worried he might embarrass himself if he just stayed still and watch Tezuka fuck himself on his cock, he grabbed Tezuka's hips hard and pulled nearly all of the way out before slamming back in. Tezuka arched back and let out a moan that made Sanada's balls tingle. "Yes," he encouraged as he started thrusting into Tezuka hard and fast.

He knew instinctively that Tezuka could handle it, and his dragon side was telling him to claim Tezuka, to make him his and to not hold back. And with every moan and gasp of pleasure, Sanada tried to thrust even harder and faster than before.

"Sanada! Please! More!" Tezuka half begged and half demanded as he writhed as much as he could in Sanada's grip.

"Touch yourself," Sanada said, then gave Tezuka's ass a harder slap than he had before. It caused Tezuka to moan and Sanada promised he would explore that particular kink of his partner's sometime in the near future.

Tezuka managed to pull himself together enough to sneak a hand under his body and stroke himself; Sanada also made plans to get Tezuka to do that for his viewing pleasure, too. But then all thought was taken right out of his head as Tezuka yelled out his name while he came. Tezuka found release through the pleasure that Sanada had given him, and the sound of his name on Tezuka lips pushed the emperor to his own. He gave one last hard thrust and released his seed deep inside of Tezuka with a mighty and possessive roar.

His hips jerked sporadically a few more times before he all but collapsed on Tezuka's back, both of them sweaty and panting. He managed to fall to his side and take Tezuka with him, so he was holding the other man close as they relaxed on the bed and caught their breath. To say that the sex had been intense would have been an understatement. But as sated and tired as Sanada currently was by it, he was already planning all of the different things that he wanted to try with Tezuka as soon as they were recovered.

He was sure Yagyuu could keep the kingdom running well enough while he locked himself in his chambers with Tezuka for a day or a week. He supposed a whole month would be pushing it, but he may get away with a fortnight before Yukimura and Yanagi heard about it and returned to kick his ass back to the throne room.

Bemused by the thought of his friends and advisors having to come back from waging wars to physically pull him away from the dragon in his arms so he would get back to work, he easily gave into post-coital bliss and nodded off. His last thought was of how pleased he was that Tezuka trusted him enough to have fallen asleep already. Either that or sex with him was just that mind blowing.

### 3. Chapter 3

Tezuka woke to the orange glow of sun's rays as the it made its slow descent behind the distant mountains. It took him a moment to remember why he had been sleeping during the day, and where he was. But it was hard to miss the arm wrapped around him, or the scent of the emperor filling the room.

In a way, he didn't regret what he did. The emperor was handsome and the sex had been fantastic. And there was a chance that now that they had both gotten it out of their systems that they could carry on. But it was a mistake to stay after they'd had their fun. Especially to stay so late.

He had to get cleaned up and change to escort Atobe to dinner. And he was sure that Sanada needed to get prepared for dinner as well, as it was the meal that he shared with his guests in the castle.

Noticing that Sanada was still asleep, Tezuka decided to trust that one of the emperor's many advisors or attendants would make sure he was prepared in time for his next engagement and did his best to slip out of the bed.

He was only halfway out of Sanada's hold when the arm he had almost escaped wrapped tightly around him again to draw him back.

"Going somewhere?" Sanada asked in a sleep rough voice that made his libido take interest. He stamped it down and focused on what he was doing.

"Yes," he said simply, and made to slide out of the bed again.

"Why? It's early enough still to enjoy each other a bit longer."

"Because this was a mistake; I need to go." Tezuka finally managed to escape Sanada's hold and sat up. The emperor immediately did the same and reached for him again.

"After you submitted to me so beautifully, you're running away? I don't understand."

It was true that Tezuka had enjoyed giving in, letting Sanada take over and do whatever he had wanted with him, but it didn't mean anything now. What he did during sex did not dictate what he did with rest of his time.

"I have a duty to Atobe and his familyâ€¦ I am his guard. And I promised to see him safely to dinner." Tezuka slid to the edge of the bed and stood before Sanada could pull him back. Now he just had to ignore the mess between his legs and find his clothes.

"The palace guards will keep him safe, and he has other guards in his entourage besides you. I'd much rather that you accompany me to dinner than him," Sanada said as he slid out of the bed on the opposite side and started moving toward him.

"I'm not worthy of such an honour. And I already gave my word to Atobe," Tezuka said, and would have grabbed his pants and left the room, but he saw that Sanada held his glasses in his hand. He held

his own out for them.

"When will you understand that I get to decide what is and isn't proper in my kingdom, or who is and isn't worthy of my attention?" Sanada asked.

Sanada placed Tezuka's glasses in his hand and grabbed onto his wrist, pulling him in close. "I worked hard to prove to the nobles and the kingdom that I was strong enough to lead them, and that I deserved to be their emperor. Trust me when I say that they will not question me if it's you that I choose to have beside me at my table, in my bed, or in my throne room."

Tezuka swallowed at the intensity of Sanada's words, then shook his wrist out of Sanada's light hold. "You're mistaken. It's not me that you want."

And before Sanada could argue any further, he scooped up his pants from the floor and hurried out of the bedroom. Closing the door behind him, he hoped that Sanada would take the hint and not follow him out into this room, so that he could have the time to dress himself properly before making the trek back to Atobe's rooms.

As a shifter, he was not overly shy about nudity, but he felt it would not be wise to parade about the castle while naked. Especially not when there was still evidence of his activities with Sanada covering his body.

He sighed as he slid his glasses on and, after a moment to listen and see if Sanada would follow him in here, began dressing. If he hurried, he was sure he would have time for a quick hand bath before he needed to put on more formal clothes and meet Atobe.

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"Soâ€¦ what did you do?" Niou asked as he stepped out onto the street beside Tezuka.

After seeing Atobe back to his rooms and declining an invitation from the fellow guards for a game of cards, Tezuka made his way back into the city to finish exploring. Or so he told Atobe and the others in his party. Mostly, he just needed to escape the castle, where at any moment he could run into the emperor again. He wasn't ready to see him again. Not when thoughts of their love making was still so fresh. Besides, the way the emperor had been glaring at everyone during dinner made Tezuka suspect that Sanada would not be the easiest person to speak with right now.

And all of this meant that the last thing he wanted to deal with while he was trying to clear his head was the weird guard of Sanada's who spoke entirely too much.

"I did nothing," Tezuka finally replied. And while he had done something, it was nothing he wished to talk about with the man beside himâ€¦ or even think about again. It was a mistake. And that's all it should remain.

"Uh-huh. Nothing typically doesn't make my emperor literally steam from his nose."

"..." he would not be baited into saying anything.

"Or maybe that's the problem. Maybe you're a little too frigid and you left the guy hanging. That would make me steam too. You know?" Niou said as he slid in front of Tezuka's path.

It took all of his effort to not respond verbally or physically. It would be foolish to do either, but even he had male pride, and being told that he was either teasing Sanada and then leaving him, or too cold or inexperienced to complete the job well enough, was insulting. He was rather tempted to start steaming from the nose himself, but willed himself to remain calm.

"Hmmm a tough nut to crack, huh? Well I'm that sure something happened. The guards saw you two head to his private quarters for quite some timeâ€|"

Tezuka sighed. Guards were very good at guarding people from physical harm, but they were rarely as good at guarding their tongues as well as employers might wish.

"What I do is none of your concern."

"It is when it makes the emperor grouchy. He's not really all sunshine and roses on the best of days. And when he's pissyâ€| wellâ€| advisors are happy if they manage to escape with just tears and not slaps, too."

Tezuka was about to say something that he was likely to regret when sounds of explosions and fighting filled the air. It was some distance away, but the noise was unmistakeable to Tezuka.

"What was that?" he asked, already bracing himself for a fight.

"Monsters," Niou said casually and gave a shrug. Despite being some sort of guard of Sanada's, he seemed to be in no rush to defend the citizens of the city.

"Monsters?" Tezuka asked. Surely monsters did not set explosives.

"They invade from the dark forests from time to time. Don't worry about it though. The citizens are well practiced in what to do if any are spotted, or if they infiltrate the city. But it's nothing for a foreigner to concern himself with."

"There was an explosion. And if these creatures are deadly, I can help. I'm a skilled fighter," Tezuka said. Matters between him and the emperor did not affect his desire to protect people, or to do what was right.

"Like I said, it's unnecessary," Niou said and then pointed to the sky.

Tezuka looked up into the sky and caught sight of a dark creature moving overhead towards the commotion. "Is thatâ€|?"

"A dragon? Yup." Niou said and danced out of the way of a few

customers who had come out of a nearby pub to gawk up at the sky. "And with the mood you left him in, I expect he'll be more than happy to take it out on the monsters before they can hurt anyone."

It took Tezuka only a second to realize that he was seeing Sanada in his dragon form. And it took even less than that for him to acknowledge and appreciate just what a handsome dragon Sanada made. But then fear set in, and even if he shouldn't allow himself to care for Sanada beyond the fact that political stability in a region made Atobe's job easier, he couldn't help but worry. "But won't the citizens be angry? They may try to hurt him," Tezuka said. He was more worried about his people hurting him than whatever beasts may be attacking. Dragons were made of tough hide and could handle any small threat without fear of harm.

To his question, Niou just laughed and then gave him a hearty pat on the shoulder that caused him to stumble away slightly. "Why would they hurt someone who keeps them safe? He's their beloved emperor and he uses his powers, all of them, to protect everyone in his kingdom. They are thankful to him. Not fearful."

"..." Logically, what Niou said made sense. But Tezuka wasn't used to people being logical when it came to dealing with dragons. He had been run out of more cities than he'd care to admit when his identity was exposed, even if they had found out because he had shifted to save them.

"I take it that they don't feel the same where you're from?" Niou asked. And for the first time since they met, Tezuka felt like he was not being teased or insulted.

"Atobe doesâ€¦" Tezuka admitted. He would not be travelling with the man if he couldn't stand dragons. Somehow, it was easier to let his guard down when he could see Sanada flying in the sky and hear the respect for him in the voices of the citizens around him.

"Is that why you're so loyal to him?" Niou asked, his voice soft.

"Among other reasons," Tezuka said, then quickly shut his mouth, as he realized that he had said too much. Niou was dangerous in more than the obvious ways, and Tezuka did not wish to share anything else with the man. Especially since he had a feeling that it would all make its way back to Sanada.

"If my help is not needed, then I should return to the castle. It seems that it's not safe to be out wandering today," Tezuka said, finally tearing his eyes away from the sky.

"As you wish. Should I escort you?" Niou asked.

"No. I can make my own way. I'm sure that you have business here in the city to handle." Tezuka didn't wait for a reply before turning and making his way back to the castle. While he may not have pushed Sanada completely from his mind, at least he had numerous other things to keep him occupied. Thoughts of monsters, dragon acceptance, and a handsome black dragon were sure to make sleep elusive.

Tezuka returned to the castle and, after checking in with the others to assure them that all was well, went to talk to Atobe. After preparing tea, Tezuka sat down on the couch in the small receiving area of Atobe's room and filled him in on what he had seen that night.

"Is it something that we need to be concerned with?" Atobe asked, as he picked up his tea.

"I don't think so. From what I can tell, the citizens are well trained on what to do when creatures attack and the emperor quickly handles it," Tezuka said.

"And the explosion you mentioned?"

Tezuka was curious about that too. But Niou hadn't seemed at all concerned, which made Tezuka reconsider what it was. And if the creatures attacking were indeed some form of monster, not shifters or humans, then being attacked by bombs made little sense.

"I think that it may be a crude defence and warning system in one," Tezuka said. "I don't know if a sentry would activate it, or if there is a trip wire in place or something. But I suspect that the explosion would slow down the attack long enough for people to seek shelter. And considering how clearly I heard it with how far away I was, it certainly is an effective way to warn others."

"I'm not fond of doing nothing even if I feel assured that our business here won't be disturbed by the attacks, as you assure me they're contained."

"I feel the same way. But we can't force them to accept our assistance when they don't feel that they need it. And this is the Rikkai empire, they are hardly a helpless farming village," Tezuka said. With how welcomed they'd been in the city, and how limited the guards were around the city and castle, it was easy to forget that this was the center of the great military powered empire of Rikkai.

Though Tezuka supposed that a great deal of the soldiers were off with the general, waging wars or defending borders, and those not on active duty would be visiting family or training in barracks, wherever those may be. Still, he was confident that anyone foolish enough to attack the heart of Rikkai, beyond mindless monsters, would be in for a rude surprise. If they had not known that Sanada was a dragon shifter before visiting, he doubted that many others would.

"You're right. Though I may make some subtle inquiries to those I'm doing business with to see how long this has been happening, and if it's getting worse," Atobe said.

Tezuka nodded. The nobles would only assume that Atobe was concerned with his safety, and it never hurt to have more information about such things.

"Good. And now that that is sorted. Do you plan on telling me what is going on with you and the emperor? He was sending you the most confusing mix of looks all through dinner and was scowling at



everyone else."

"It's complicated," Tezuka said with great reluctance. If he didn't say anything, Atobe would only find other ways to pry. It was best to at least give an appearance of confiding personal thoughts.

"Love always is," Atobe said.

"Love?" Tezuka said sounding slightly more shocked than he meant to.

"I have a feeling that the emperor certainly seems to think so. I'm not so sure about you yet, Tezuka. You've always been a hard man to read. I think it may be from too many years on the road."

"And who is to blame for that?" Tezuka asked, quick to latch on to a topic that was not his or the emperor's love life.

"You would have still travelled, even without me. But at least in my service you were given a respected job and treated as a skilled equal," Atobe said. And Tezuka had to agree. The area where his family once lived had quickly turned against dragons and all shifters after an unfortunate accident. And it seemed that the sentiment was spreading faster than he could travel. Atobe had saved him from being a poor and hungry nomad and he could never thank him enough for that.

"But perhaps it's time you settle down. I'm not sure that this lifestyle is suited to you," Atobe added when Tezuka didn't reply.

Tezuka gave Atobe a curious look and wondered, not for the first time, just how much Atobe was able to see and parse together with limited information. It was useful when it was turned against others, but always unsettling when that same set of skills were focused on him. "Or perhaps not," Tezuka said, though it lacked the conviction that most of his words held.

Atobe shrugged in a graceful manner that would put even the most dignified nobles to shame, then set his now empty cup down. "Either way, I'm sure that you that have no plans to stay, so I will bid you a goodnight here."

Tezuka nodded, and was thankful that Atobe had at least used his insight to know that Tezuka would not be open to an invitation into his bed tonight and likely no time in the near future. "Thank you for your time" he said politely. "And have a goodnight, Atobe." He gave his boss and his dear friend a slight bow and headed out to his own room.

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Sanada paced his office, growling at Yagyuu as he continued to ramble on about reports. "I know that the attacks are getting more frequent," he said. Of course he knew. He was the one that usually took care of them. They had gone from once a season to once a month, and now to every fortnight. He feared what would happen if they came more often than that. He could handle the incursions, but they were growing stronger each time, and the people on the edge of the city closest to the attacks were becoming more vocal in demanding that

more be done.

"No need to take your bad mood out on him. He's just a weak little paper pusher," Niou said as he slid into the office from the balcony doors. Why he decided to take that route and not the main door like a civilized creature, Sanada didn't know. And not knowing or understanding the way Niou worked made him even more frustrated right now.

"Are you saying I should take it out on you?" he asked as he stalked towards Niou, Yagyuu momentarily forgotten.

Niou held up his hands and danced out of the way. "Hardly. But if you set fire to Yanagi's carefully selected advisor, he's going to be pissy. And you know that when he's angry he talks to Yukimura about it, then that will make Yukimura annoyedâ€¦ and you know who he'll take it out onâ€¦ I'll give you a hint. It's not me."

Niou's grin was far too big, tempting Sanada to burn it off his face, but he suspected that somehow that would still lead to Yukimura being annoyed with him. And damn it. He was supposed to the emperor, he shouldn't be giving in to his generals and advisors, they should be answering to him.

He cursed himself for surrounding himself with strong, capable people who weren't afraid to challenge him when he was being unreasonable, but were still unfailingly loyal. Or mostly unfailingly loyal. He would really prefer Yukimura and Yanagi at his back instead of Niou and Yagyuu. At least they were competent, and not likely to cause too much trouble for him with real trouble facing the kingdom.

Taking a few breaths to remind himself that they were on his side, he managed to calm down enough to not want to melt either of them and turned back to Niou. "Alright. I will not catch Yagyuu on fire. If that's all you had to say, then you can go."

"Not so fast. Didn't you say that you wanted me to keep an eye on your eye candy?" Niou waggled his eyebrows as if he had just said something clever. Yagyuu was fortunately wise enough to feign going back to work, even if Sanada could tell he was still listening closely.

"If you have something to say about Tezuka, say it," he said, and was proud of himself for not strangling the information out of Niou. He wanted to know everything about Tezuka. Especially if Tezuka had mentioned him, or if he was having second thoughts about fleeing from Sanada's bed with the word mistake on his lips.

"He went for a walk again last night. I think that he does it when he has too much on his mind to sleep."

Sanada could relate to that. He often enjoyed strolls in the garden or flights over his territory when sleep evaded him. It would be nice to have company on the nights when such thoughts kept them both up.

"Anyway, it meant he was out in the city when the attack happened."

With Niou's nonchalance and the lack of official report, Sanada

logically knew that Tezuka was not at all injured in the attack. But still, his heart clenched in fear at the thought of his dragon being injured. No matter what Tezuka thought, Sanada knew that his fellow dragon would come around and acknowledge that they were meant to be.

"And?" Sanada urged through clenched teeth as Niou paused to poke at a flower, then flop onto a couch.

"Oh yeahâ€¦ well he saw you in dragon form. Seemed really impressed by it. And he was really worried for you. Thought that the people in the city would attack you or something. Crazy, right?"

Sanada frowned at that thought. Yes, he was quite pleased that Tezuka apparently found his dragon form alluring, and he was even more thrilled that Tezuka was concerned for his safety. But for Tezuka to think that his own people, the people he protected, would turn against him made his heart ache for his dragon mate.

He knew, of course, that things must have been tough for Tezuka to leave his homelands. Dragons were extremely territorial and disliked being forced to leave a place that they considered home. And he had also pieced together that Tezuka's loyalty toward Atobe was more likely from Atobe's help in the past and continued protection than from any contract, no matter what Tezuka said.

He wanted to leave now, give Tezuka a big hug and tell him that if he stayed here, he would never be asked to abandon his home again, and that they could protect their lands together. But he knew that right now such actions would not be welcomed. And at the moment, his duty had to come before his heart.

"You told him that he was incorrect, right?" Sanada asked instead.

"Of course. I basically told him he was crazy. And you know what? Despite thinking that all shifters or whatever would be attacked even for helping, he still wanted to run off and help the citizens. And then when you showed up he looked like he wanted to help even moreâ€¦ but I told him it wasn't needed. We didn't need you getting distracted by Tezuka while you're roasting monsters."

"A wise decision," Sanada said. He was glad that Niou had stopped Tezuka from entering into the battle, as the man's sudden appearance would most definitely have thrown off his concentration, especially given his turbulent mood. But the thought of Tezuka wanting to protect his people and the idea of fighting side by side filled his heart with hope. His goal to make Tezuka completely his seemed that much more in reach.

"Do you think that he'd fight with you if you asked?" Yagyuu asked, proving that he had indeed been listening closely.

Niou shrugged and looked at Sanada. "I think it depends on this guy," Niou said, pointing a finger rudely at Sanada.

"Do you have something in mind? Because right now, one dragon is more than enough to handle the beasts. I don't see what a second one would do," Sanada said.

Yagyuu and Niou both froze and stared at him in surprise; Sanada replayed back what he just said. He supposed that it had been a bit of a secret beforehand. But with his plans to make Tezuka his consort and Yagyuu wanting him to help protect the capital, the truth was going to come out soon enough anyway.

"He's a dragon?" Yagyuu asked at the same time as Niou's, "Did he show you?"

"Yes. He's a dragon, though I haven't seen his dragon form yet."

"If he's a dragon, the two of you could, with some ground forces for support, likely take the fight back to the monsters' base. Even if you don't destroy it completely, you could cause enough damage to scale the battles back to only a couple of times a year." Yagyuu pulled several rolls of paper from a shelf and brought them to the large table, which was already covered in the maps that Sanada used to keep track of Yukimura's movements and maintain the borders of his kingdom.

Intrigued by Yagyuu's words, Niou and Sanada both helped him unroll the maps and weigh them down.

"All of the previous attack locations and times have been recorded. Several of your top strategists still in the capital have been debating over how best to use this information to lead us back to their shelter," Yagyuu explained as he pointed out and marked different areas of the map.

"So the location has already been narrowed down quite a bit. This could actually work. We might be able to rid ourselves of these weird demon creatures for good. Or at least give us a break from them. I'm tired of re-rigging traps so often," Niou said.

"Agreed. Now we just need to get Tezuka to agree."

"We?" Niou asked and raised a brow.

"I will find a way to speak with him."

Niou gave a snort. "Good luck with that. And am I still on babysitting duty? He's a dragon, so you can't be worried about him getting into trouble. And you want him so badly that you probably wouldn't care if he robbed the treasury."

Sanada understood what Niou was saying, and it was true. He had asked Niou to watch over Tezuka to make sure that he stayed safe and didn't get into mischief. The latter was a common practice with new acquaintances staying in the castle, but asking Niou to personally watch over someone was a rare assignment. Even knowing that Tezuka was a dragon, not a more fragile shifter, did not change his desire to make sure that he was safe. Dragons were difficult to kill, but not impossible.

"No. Keep watching over him. And report back if anything else of interest occurs."

"Aye, aye captain," Niou said. With a mock salute for Sanada and a wink and feral grin for Yagyuu, he headed back toward the balcony. Sanada didn't know whether he would continue scaling down the wall to

the ground or take a nap out in the sun, but either way, he turned back to Yagyuu.

"Alright. Let's get some work done." He was still annoyed at the monsters and with Tezuka's decision to want nothing more from him. But after Niou's news and Yagyuu's idea, he was feeling balanced enough to focus on business. There was little else he could do for now, until either Tezuka calmed down enough to be cornered by him or the beasts chose to attack again.

#### 4. Chapter 4

Sanada climbed the steps of a rarely used tower to reach the walkway connecting it to an even more abandoned one. Aside from Sanada, only patrolling guards frequented it. Therefore, he was met with great surprise when the guard at the entrance of the walkway stopped to inform him that Tezuka was currently occupying it. That astonishment grew when the guard told him that Tezuka had been here three times this week.

Sanada enjoyed the tower because being so high up and feeling the breeze against his face and body soothed the beast inside of him when he had no time to go for a proper flight. So he imagined that was probably what had brought Tezuka up to this area. The other dragon had probably not expected to run into him, but as it was hardly a secret that he enjoyed coming up to the walkway for fresh air, his mind was more than happy to supply him with scenarios of Tezuka deliberately trying to find alone time with him.

Thanking the guard for his work, Sanada stepped out onto the walkway and instantly caught sight of Tezuka. Normally being up here soothed and calmed his beast, but being so close to Tezuka after nearly two weeks of the other apparently avoiding him brought out all of his dragon's predatory instincts and desire.

He stamped down those instincts and moved toward Tezuka in even, measured steps to not look like he was stalking toward him and getting ready to pounce. Tezuka looked so peaceful that it would be a shame to ruin it. But as he neared, he knew he shouldn't have bothered trying to be stealthy. Tezuka was a dragon. And even if they didn't talk about such things openly, their senses were far keener than any human's could hope to be. While he may not have heard him speak with the wind all around them, his other senses were more than sharp enough to notice his approach.

"Good day, Kunimitsu," Sanada said. Tezuka had told him once to call him that, and he was hardly going to revert to more distant ways of address now.

"Your majesty," Tezuka said. He executed a flawless bow, and while Sanada wanted to tell him that he never had to bow to him, he was too happy to have Tezuka all to himself to waste their time on words that Tezuka wasn't likely to listen to.

"I see you have found my favourite retreat," Sanada said, and gestured to the view that looked over the city and the forests and the mountains beyond.

"It's very soothing up here. And a good place to think," Tezuka

said.

That intrigued Sanada and he turned to look at Tezuka - who was far more lovely than any view - to make sure he didn't miss any subtle change in the other's demeanor. "About what?"

"Many things. I saw you in your dragon form" Tezuka said, glancing over at him before looking back out at the view.

"And?" he prompted when he was unsure if Tezuka was going to carry on or not.

"I thought you looked quite handsome. I'd never seen a black dragon before."

That was not surprising to Sanada. As far as he could tell, the black dragon came from his line alone, which had, for the most part, tragically ended several years back in a horrible sailing tragedy. Even dragons could drown in a bad enough storm, too far from shore. But he refused to think such unpleasant thoughts when the creature of his desire was telling him how handsome he had been. "Thank you. I'd be most pleased to show you my dragon form in daylight, so you could better inspect it," he said. Internally, he could already feel his dragon self preening at the thought of being able to show off for Tezuka. He wondered if the man would shift and join him or pet him lovingly like a cherished pet.

Tezuka did ridiculous things to his thought process; he just wanted to pull the other man tight and kiss him until they were both breathless. To stop himself from such actions, he gripped the stone railing harder and focused on not driving his future consort off again. He knew that they were destined to be, but it did not mean that Tezuka had come around to accepting such a thing yet. And he did not need to risk Tezuka leaving to travel the globe with Atobe before he had.

"I could not dare to take up so much of the emperor's precious time. Especially when it seems that he is busy single handedly protecting his people from foul beasts," Tezuka said. Though the look in his eyes when he met Sanada's gave him hope that Tezuka really did want to take up his time.

"Nonsense. I wouldn't offer if I didn't have the time for it. And as for the beasts, I don't deal with them as single handedly as you may have been led to believe." Sanada chanced sliding a little closer to Tezuka so that he could almost feel the heat radiating off of him.

"Does that mean that you're not adverse to help?" Tezuka asked, turning such that he was properly looking at Sanada.

"Not at all. Assistance with problems is always a welcomed gift," Sanada said. He hoped his voice did not betray the rapid beating of his heart. Any man would be affected by the way Tezuka looked at him, with that mixture of expressions slipping past undoubtedly long practiced shields. Surely, very few ever saw such concern and tenderness from the stoic dragon guard.

"Then, I'd like to offer my aid the next time these creatures attack, if I'm still in the area."

"And Atobe is okay with this?" Sanada asked. He then mentally kicked himself for bringing up his rival. He should not be distracting Tezuka from what was becoming a tender moment between them.

"He has given me his full permission to do what I think is best in this situation," Tezuka said.

The way Tezuka's eyes skittered away from his own made him think that there was more to that sentence than just fighting monsters. But fantasies were for his bed and not for now. So instead, he reached for Tezuka's hand and held it lightly in his own.

"Then I would be honoured to fight beside you. And perhaps you'd be willing to join me for a tactical meeting with my advisors. We've been discussing the possibility of following the battle back to the beasts' lair and destroying as many of them as we can." There was no need to tell Tezuka that they had already planned for his involvement in them. He did not want to spoil Tezuka's kind gesture by saying that they had been planning to ask him for help.

"Is there a reason for the desire to change tactics now?" Tezuka asked. And notably to Sanada, left his hand resting in his.

"The monster attacks have become more frequent. Once or twice a year was troublesome, but tolerable. But now it's every few weeks, and despite the low casualty rate, everyone is on edge," Sanada admitted truthfully. He had long since stopped considering Tezuka an outsider to Rikkai issues; To be honest, he wasn't sure he had ever thought of Tezuka as an outsider.

"And you hope that even if we do not fully eradicate these creatures, we can make their attacks less frequent once again?"

"Exactly. And with you beside me, I have no doubt we can do it." He gave Tezuka's hand a light squeeze before bringing it up to his lips to kiss. "I will send a messenger with a time and location for the meeting. It will likely be within the next two days, so that we can have a plan before the monsters attack again. Until then, I hope you remain well." And with that, Sanada reluctantly released Tezuka's hand and stepped back from him.

"And I you," Tezuka said. The light colour on his cheeks made Sanada want to kiss him, but he ignored it and his raging dragon. He forced himself to turn and walk back from where he came.

Tezuka wanted him safe. Tezuka wanted his city and his people safe. And Tezuka was not as adverse to his company or his touch as he claimed. All in all, it was a successful and pleasant surprise visit with Tezuka, and Sanada would not ruin it by pushing his luck.

As he walked away from the one he desired, he was sure both Yukimura and Yanagi would be impressed with his restraint and that he had, for once, used his brain and not just his instincts.

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"So you can see their shoes are looking a bit rough. It'd be best to get it done before we head out again," Shishido said as he lifted up one of their larger mare's back legs to show one of the horseshoes

that he wanted to get redone. "But if you think we'll be leaving in a hurry, I could put it off until we reach our next stop. I think that all of them but Thunder can make another trek just fine. And Thunder I'll get to later today if neither of you need him."

Atobe considered the state of the horses' feet and then looked over at Thunder, his favourite stallion, before walking over to him. "I think I'll survive a day without him. We all need days in which we're pampered, right Thunder?" He asked gently stroking the horse's nose. "As for our schedule—" He gestured to Tezuka, who was charged with keeping them all informed of impending dangers while they worked.

"You should be fine to see to all of them. If the emperor's assumptions are correct, another attack is imminent but there's a plan in place to hopefully eliminate the attacks completely." Tezuka had faith in their plan after hearing about all of the contingencies and back ups. It still relied on a bit of initial luck to find the lair, but if they could succeed there, Tezuka felt confident that the rest would easily fall into place.

Now, they just had to hope that the waiting did not cause any member of their plans to get restless and careless. Which was why Tezuka was more than content to throw himself into routine household maintenance with Atobe for the day. Even if talk kept turning from the task at hand back to the monsters and the emperor that he was trying not to focus on.

"Does that plan include two pissed off dragons raining down fire?" Shishido asked. He set down the mare's foot and leaned back against a stable door.

"Quite possibly. It seemed prudent to offer my assistance. It will certainly garner Atobe some favourable prices and future trades," Tezuka said. And that logic allowed him to ignore that it was truly his desire to help the emperor and fight by his side that drove him to make the offer.

"Yeah. And I bet you're pretty excited to have another dragon around. When was the last one we saw? That spastic green one that had convinced a whole village that he was symbol of luck or something and had to be worshipped? Some people will fall for anything."

"True. Though the man was harmless enough. And better worshipped and protected than ostracized. If Tezuka wants to stretch his wings out in a battle where his efforts will be genuinely appreciated, I see nothing wrong with it," Atobe said.

"You sure you can handle it? The stable hands were talking with me the other night, and they all have ideas on what these creatures really are. Some said that they might be manticores." Shishido always managed to get some of the most interesting gossip by posing as a harmless stable boy, a ruse made easier by his genuine love and knowledge of the beasts.

"Even manticores have trouble against dragonhide and fire. And if the emperor has managed to push them back on his own for some time, I'm sure that we'll be more than capable when we combine our forces," Tezuka said. And just to be on the safe side, the medics assigned to the various units in this plan would be well equipped with various



antidotes.

"Fair enough. But you'll have to make sure to actually open up and share the story after, okay?" Shishido said.

Tezuka was about to reply when he heard an explosion in the distance and horns rallying around them. Tezuka turned to look at Atobe, but was waved off before he could say anything.

"Go. Shishido and the guards supplied by Rikkai can see me back safely," Atobe said.

Tezuka nodded and headed out of the stables, already undoing the uniform jacket he was wearing as he went to find somewhere somewhat secluded to shift.

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It had been a long time since Sanada had flown beside a fellow dragon, and longer still since that person was someone other than family. So to be accompanied by Tezuka in all his shimmering, blue scaled glory felt like a dream. And even though they flew toward danger and Sanada's protective instincts were roaring at him to be on guard, he couldn't help sneaking glances at Tezuka. His lover was amazing to behold in both forms.

As they neared the site of the attack, Sanada's focus shifted back to the upcoming battle and what had to be done. He noticed the troops closing in on the location and looked further out to where Yagyuu suspected the lair was.

"Do you see where we need to go?" Tezuka's voice asked in his mind, startling him for a moment.

It had been so long since anyone had talked to him that way; it took him a second to realize that it was Tezuka's voice that he had heard. With that knowledge, he now wanted to hear more of Tezuka in his mind. It was one thing to communicate with other shifters mind to mind in shifted form, but to do so with another dragon, one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with? Well, it felt more than perfect, and even while flying into battle, Sanada took a moment to savour it.

"Follow me," he replied. He gave a mighty roar and flew past the small incursion, leaving it to the soldiers in favor of following the trail of wreckage that the creatures had left behind.

Sanada had to circle around an area a couple of times before he saw the exact spot they needed, then he gave another roar and swooped down. "Here."

Fortunately, the entrance to the cave was large enough for them to walk in while in dragon form; Sanada really didn't fancy shifting and walking around naked into dangerous and unknown territory. As they moved deeper into the ground, they heard noises up ahead and Sanada paused. "We're near. If the area opens up, I'll go left and you take the right. If not, cover my back and blind sides," Sanada ordered.

"I understand," Tezuka said. Sanada could practically feel Tezuka

bracing himself for the upcoming battle. He had yet to see him fight, but he had no doubt that Tezuka would follow orders and either keep his blind spots safe, or do his job in clearing his side of the area.

Sanada moved forward as stealthily as a large dragon in a tunnel could and was relieved to see that the space opened up to a large cavern up ahead.

"It's a cave. Looks like plenty of room to work with. Let's go," Sanada said. He then dashed forward, fire shooting out in front of him and taking out several of the beasts before he burst into the cave. He spared a quick glance to see Tezuka coming up behind him and going right, like he was told.

Despite the room in the cavern, it was still somewhat awkward to fight, as he had to beware of random stalagmites and stalactites as he moved. He also could not easily make out all of the small entrances to the cavern, until a monster had slipped through one and started attacking him.

Though with their size, tougher hides, sharp claws and teeth, and ability to breathe fire, they still at had the advantage. Sanada was making a good headway through his side of the cave.

There was a short break in the action around him; It felt as if the beasts were waiting to see who would attack first, or trying, with their simple minds, to form a plan. So he risked glancing over at Tezuka.

Tezuka was easily swiping and biting any beasts that made the mistake of getting too close and shooting bursts of flames at those still further away. He was just admiring how he moved when he saw a beast burst out of an upper tunnel to the cavern and land on Tezuka's back.

Tezuka roared and shook. The monster's claws dug into Tezuka's hide desperately, but for that he was repaid, with being smashed up against a cavern wall. It was over nearly as fast as it had happened and Tezuka had already turned his attention back to the other creatures around him. But Sanada had seen Tezuka be attacked. He could smell the sweet scent of dragon blood in the air, even over all of the putrid scents of the beasts.

His dragon couldn't stand the thought of Tezuka being injured. Especially not being injured while helping to fight his battles. Sanada's roar shook the cave, and before he even knew what he was doing, he was shooting molten fire in all directions but Tezuka's, and swiping his lethal claws and tail at anything that avoided his flames.

Everything became a blur, but when he stopped, he found himself in the middle of the room, panting and covered in blood, with nothing at all moving around him. "Kunimitsu?!" he yelled out to the other's mind. Had he inadvertently injured the man he was trying to defend? He would never be able to live with himself if that were the case.

He frantically looked around, but saw no sign of the beautiful blue scales he was already addicted to.

"I'm here," Tezuka said aloud, his voice echoing in the caves. He stepped out of a small tunnel off to the side and into the main room. "I felt it prudent to get out of the way."

Sanada shifted and ran over to his side, careful to avoid tripping on the remains of their foe as he did. "Are you okay? You were injured," he said. And not even taking into account they were both naked, he grabbed Tezuka and started examining him for injuries.

"It was just a scratch," Tezuka said, and then turned enough to show Sanada the thin red line near his left shoulder. "I don't even think it's bleeding anymore."

Sanada looked at the wound and then gently touched it. Tezuka was right. The injury was nothing more than a scratch now. And thanks to their quicker healing, it would probably be gone completely by morning. If anyone else had gotten this injury, he would not have thought twice about it. He probably would have even teased them, if they had complained about the pain. But this wasn't just anyone. This was Tezuka. His mate, his future consort and his reason for being. He still felt panicked by the thought of losing him.

He knew that they should report back to Yagyu, or at least to some officer of his soldiers but he couldn't handle others right now. He especially couldn't handle others around Tezuka, even more so since he was nude. He needed some time to settle and find the balance between his dragon instincts and human mind again.

"Are you well enough to fly?" he asked after once more reassuring himself that the cut wasn't bleeding.

"Of course. I feel fine."

"Then there's somewhere I want to show you."

"Shouldn't we wait for the others to arrive?" Tezuka asked.

"No. They'll manage without us. Come on." He tugged on Tezuka's hand, giving him no option but to follow him away from the massacre and back into the open. He then shifted and was glad when Tezuka did the same without asking any more questions.

He flew high up into the sky, checked to make sure Tezuka was with him, then headed towards the mountains that they had both been admiring not so many days before. "I want to share a special place with you," Sanada said to Tezuka's mind as he flew.

Tezuka nodded and flew on strongly beside him. When Sanada veered toward a hidden caldera within the mountains, Tezuka followed.

"It's beautiful," Tezuka said as they circled the tranquil area before finding a good sized area to land in.

"It's really only accessible by air. So it tends to be a very private and untouched space."

"I can see why you enjoy it." Tezuka walked around the edge of the natural lake, first examining it, then admiring the surrounding trees. When he was satisfied with his exploration, he walked back to

Sanada, who waited on the sandy beach for him.

"Rest with me?" Sanada asked, once he felt that Tezuka was done familiarizing himself with the area. He needed more time to find his balance and reassure himself that Tezuka was perfectly alright. His logical side was still drowned out by his draconic instincts. Spending some private time with Tezuka to collect himself was just what he needed.

Fortunately, it seemed as if Tezuka understood what he wanted, because he didn't question him. He merely nodded and moved closer to Sanada.

"I didn't like seeing you get hurt," Sanada admitted. Though there was no way that Tezuka could have missed Sanada's reaction to what he could now confirm was nothing more than a simple scratch. Blinded by fear and anger, he had been ruthless with his revenge.

"I noticed. But it was rather effective at destroying those beasts," Tezuka said with no fear or condemnation in his voice.

Knowing that he had not scared Tezuka away with his protective instincts helped to calm Sanada. And taking time for themselves after the battle in what Sanada considered a private sanctuary seemed nearly as special as their first time together. But not completely satisfied with the distance still between them, Sanada moved his tail so it rested over Tezuka's, and when Tezuka's curled his up around Sanada's, he gave a rumble of pleasure - the dragon form of purring.

No matter what words Tezuka might say about this not being right, Sanada wouldn't believe them. His mate knew just as well as he did that they were meant to be together and made a strong pair. With Tezuka by his side, his life would be complete. He would have someone to protect and direct his full dragon prowess toward without fear, and Tezuka would make him stronger by offering his support like he had during this battle.

"I'm glad you're alright, too," Tezuka voiced quietly into his mind. The simple pleasure of hearing Tezuka speak to him like this soothed more of his frayed nerves and he leaned over to rub his head against Tezuka's neck.

Right now, he wasn't an emperor. He was just a dragon in love, content with the world.

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"Here's the report on everything that you missed," Yagyu said as he set the stack down on Sanada's desk.

"And the main points?" Sanada asked, not at all interested in reading such a lengthy report right now. He didn't want anything to ruin the tranquil feeling inside of him after spending several pleasurable hours in Tezuka's company.

"The soldiers protected the citizens and took care of the small incursion with no fatalities and limited injuries. They went into the cave, discovered the mess that you two left, and concluded that no beasts remained alive. At least none they could find."

"That's good. And why do I need such a long report for that?" Sanada asked flipping through a few pages to see lengthy paragraphs.

"For future records, in case you or your descendants need to learn from this," Yagyuu stated, pushing up his glasses in a haughty manner.

"Fine. And what did they do with the cave and bodies?"

"It was such a mess, with so many dead beasts, that it was decided to close off the entrance of the cave instead of burning the bodies."

"Let me guess, Niou's idea?"

"He does love a good explosion."

"And it worked?" Sanada asked, not bothering to argue that Niou did in fact love a good explosion.

"Perfectly. So with that, combined with your and Tezuka's work, we believe that we should be free of these attacks for the foreseeable future. Possibly forever."

"But just to be safe, we have records to refer to in the future," Sanada said, lifting up the stack of papers.

"Exactly. Now. Let's talk about the victory ball," Yagyuu said, and slid into the chair across from Sanada at his desk.

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Tezuka tugged down his jacket as he looked at himself in the mirror and wondered again why he was wearing this and not his normal uniform.

"You look perfect. Now stop fidgeting," Atobe said as he waltzed into the room in one of his best outfits. He looked royal enough to be a king, despite only being a merchant with no titles. Though he was certainly successful and rich enough to buy a title or two, if he ever wanted. But Atobe's nobility was not what he was most concerned with right now.

"Why am I in this again?" Tezuka asked.

"Because the Emperor's personal tailor dropped it off this morning with a note from the emperor himself saying that it would please him to see you in it. And I see no reason why you shouldn't please him with such a small gesture," Atobe said smoothly.

Tezuka frowned at that, like he had earlier. Yes, a part of him enjoyed pleasing Sanada and it was logical to do so when he thought about of Atobe's business benefiting from it. But he shouldn't have been so easily convinced into wearing something so obviously above his station. Somehow, it hadn't seemed as flashy when it had been laid out in the box.

"And I'm not blind, Tezuka. I know you want this. Besides, it's

obvious that with an outfit like this he wants you there as his date. Even if it seems that both of you two are stubborn to work this out yourselves," Atobe said. He then walked up to Tezuka and pulled him down for a light kiss.

"Atobe," Tezuka said, a little startled.

"Go live your life, Tezuka. You deserve it." And with that, Atobe walked out and left Tezuka alone, feeling both warmed by Atobe's friendship and very confused about where his life was about to take him.

Tezuka had a feeling that if he entered the ballroom through the main door, some sort of scene would follow. Wanting to avoid such attention for as long as possible, he snuck into the ballroom by one of the side entrances normally used by servants and guards, an entrance he had found in his numerous wanderings of the castle throughout his stay.

Slipping inside, he scanned the crowd and took in all of the well dressed nobles who were relaxed and enjoying themselves. There were musicians playing lovely music off to the side, guards watching the room, and servants making sure that food and drinks were always at hand and that everything flowed smoothly. He could not fault Sanada's ability to throw a proper ball.

Looking to see where the emperor was in the hall, he was slightly startled when Niou slunk up beside him and poked him in the shoulder. "Looking for someone?" Niou asked.

Tezuka straightened his glasses and held back a sigh as he looked over at Niou. "Just admiring the turn out."

"Yeah, sure," Niou said with a dismissive wave. "You know, he was worried that you wouldn't come. Was driving us all nuts by pacing back and forth forever."

Tezuka gave him a curious look, unable to picture Sanada, the strong brave dragon he knew, to be the type to pace in worry over someone attending a ball. "I'm sure that you exaggerate."

"All the time. But not this time. And I bet his jaw dropped when you walked in wearing that. We worked hard making sure that it would fit you perfectly."

"It would have been rude to turn down such a thoughtful gift. Though I'm surprised to that hear you helped." Tezuka didn't think that Niou was overly fond of him, and he didn't see how Niou could have helped with fashion choices.

"I have special skills that come in handy for things like that," Niou said vaguely.

"I seeâ€|" Tezuka said. He really wished that Niou would leave him alone.

"Have you been avoiding him?" Niou asked suddenly.

"Pardon?"

"Since the battle. You two seemed close when you came back, and his royal grumpiness was actually happy for a bit, but then you were scarce again. I didn't know that dragons were such scaredy cats."

Tezuka frowned at Niou, who had insulted both himself and Sanada. "As an emperor, he has a lot more important things to do than worry about me."

"He doesn't think so," Niou said, and gestured to where Sanada was in the crowd. He was resplendent in his finery, and even from the length of the hall, Tezuka could feel the burn of Sanada's gaze warming him. "And I don't think that you really do either."

Niou slid behind him and gave him a less than gentle shove in the right direction. As Tezuka stumbled forward a few steps he turned to glare at Niou, but found him already walking away. He blinked as he thought he saw several fox tails waving behind him. When he caught sight of him again, Niou was back to his human self.

If Niou were a kitsune shifter, it would explain a lot about his skills and his attitude. But kitsune were known to be tricksters and not overly loyal to anyone. If Sanada had managed to tame him in some way, he was even more formidable than he imagined. But then, Sanada had also managed to tame a blue dragon, and what was a kitsune compared to that.

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As Tezuka was pushed in his direction by Niou, Sanada took that as his cue to go to the other man. Excusing himself, he stalked across the hall with a look on his face that would make people think twice before approaching. He was pleased to see that, after Tezuka's initial confusion from Niou, he seemed to regain his usual grace and started walking toward him as well. They ended up meeting halfway down the hall.

"Kunimitsu," he said. He felt a bolt of lust as he took in Tezuka up close in the outfit he had chosen for him to wear. The man looked absolutely stunning in the latest of Rikkai fashion and in the Sanada family colours.

"Your majesty," Tezuka said and gave a bow. Sanada wondered if he could get Tezuka to do that in private, then reach over and just casually push him down to his knees. He gave his head a slightly shake to snap back to reality. Now was not the time for bedroom thoughts.

"I'm glad to see that my gift fits."

"It's perfect. But far too fancy for my status as a merchant guard."

"Nonsense. You're one of the heroes of the ball. And eventually you'll realize and accept that you're the one that I want by my side," Sanada said quietly. The people around them were keeping a polite distance, but it never hurt to be cautious.

"I do realize that's what you wantâ€¦ but I'm not sure that you've fully thought it through," Tezuka said.

Knowing that Tezuka knew what he wanted was a large step forward and made Sanada feel bold. If Tezuka accepted that Sanada wanted to make him his, then all he had to do was soothe the other silly reasons holding Tezuka back. "In what ways?"

"You're an emperor. You will be expected to find someone of a suitable level to stand by your side. I'm not even from Rikkai."

"Most partners from royalty come from outside of the kingdom. It not only brings fresh blood into the bloodlines, but also a fresh perspective on how the kingdom is run. You'd be an invaluable asset that way. As far as pedigree is concerned, you are a dragon. I could ask for no better mate than that," Sanada said.

He reached out to hold Tezuka's hand, needing to touch him. He wanted so much for the other dragon to understand that he needed him, and for Tezuka to realise that this was what Tezuka wanted, too. There was no reason or excuse that Sanada would accept to keep them apart.

"You will be expected to have children."

"I don't think that will be a problem. Do you?" Sanada asked. He brought his eyes down pointedly to Tezuka's stomach before raising them back to his face, just in time to see him become a little flustered and blush. "I didn't think so. Any other objections?"

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Tezuka was initially shocked by Sanada's surety and gaze as he answered his question about children. He should have expected something like that, but it had been so long since he had spent any length of time with a fellow dragons shifter that he had forgotten what it could be like at times.

Tezuka let go of Sanada's hand and looked around at all of the well dressed nobles watching them and trying to act like they weren't. Would they be able to accept a male dragon shifter as the emperor's consort? Or would this finally push them too far with how unnatural shifters could be, and sow the first seeds of fear and hatred in a kingdom that seemed to actually accept his kind?

"I'm sure that the nobles around us will think of some," Tezuka said, after a long pause. Even he knew that his arguments against this were getting weaker. But disrupting the stability of the empire and risking the safety of Sanada and his future children was, in his mind, a legitimate fear.

"As I told you before, I've already had a battle of wills with them; I won. And if they feel that they need to question me again, I will remind them once more why I'm emperor and they are not. The people support me. And in time, they will support you and our family, too," Sanada said.

The way he spoke, with such surety and strength, eased the worry that was growing inside of Tezuka. There was still a lot more he needed to learn about Rikkai, and even more so its emperor, but he now felt



that he could give himself the time to do so.

"Alright," Tezuka said. "I'll trust you."

"Good. Now I think we should stop wasting time with worries and enjoy ourselves. May I have this dance?" Sanada asked and held out a hand to him once more asking to hold his.

It would have been easy to ignore the hand or dismiss it, to deny Sanada a dance with him and make a spectacle of the both of them in front of all of those present. But if he did that, it would be a significant gesture of refusal, one that would be hard to reverse. And while he may have tried to run away from Sanada once before, and perhaps tried too hard to deny what was between them, Tezuka knew that right now there was only one choice to make.

Without any hesitation, he placed his hand in Sanada's and gave him the smallest of smiles.

Sanada smiled back at him, gave his hand a soft squeeze, and led him to the dance floor. As they walked, people cleared to make room; a general hushed awe fell about them. Everyone watched, captivated, as the music started and they moved together. Tezuka realized that he had accepted a lot more than just a dance when he took Sanada's hand. But deciding to follow the emperor's suggestion, he would worry about it later. For now, he would enjoy the feel of Sanada's warm hands on him, leading him around the ballroom.

It was, after all, what he had wanted deep down in his heart from the moment they had laid eyes on each other. And if he were lucky, this dance with Sanada would last a lifetime.

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